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# “Nordic Cool” and writing system mimicry in global linguistic landscapes

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## Abstract

Fuelled by political and economic trends in the 21st century, the concepts “New Nordic” and “Nordic Cool” have entered the global scene in design, cuisine, entertainment, and general lifestyle (Østergaard et al., 2014; Skou and Munch, 2016; Andersen et al., 2019). Simultaneously, due to globalisation, individuals today are subjected to a higher number of language contact situations than ever before, in face-to-face communication as well as through foreign products and international advertisements. This study explores how Nordic orthographic features are capitalised on in international marketing to elevate the images of various brands. Nordic words and graphemes can be used to evoke positive associations that the consumer may have relating to the region (e.g. associations of ‘nature’, ‘simplicity’, or even ‘luxury’), or simply to index foreignness, globalism, or exclusivity (Jaworski, 2015a).

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**Keywords:** Linguistic landscape; Globalisation; Writing system mimicry; Indexicality; Globalese

## 1. From local to global linguistic landscape research

The term *linguistic landscape*, which refers to the visibility of languages in public spaces, was first introduced to linguistics by Landry and Bourhis in 1997. In their study, the linguistic landscape of an area is defined by the languages on public road signs, advertisements, and commercial shop signs (Landry and Bourhis, 1997: 25). In practice all neighbourhoods, cities, and even entire countries have their own linguistic landscape, because all public entities include some form of written language. According to Landry and Bourhis, the linguistic landscape of a territory has two principal functions: an informational function and a symbolic function. The signs in a linguistic landscape can serve as a territorial marker for the area of a linguistic community, or may display power dynamics between two languages or dialects used in the area, thus providing an informational function (Landry and Bourhis, 1997: 25–26). Meanwhile, both signs including and signs excluding local in-group or minority languages may have a symbolic function, demonstrating public or private attitudes towards certain ethnolinguistic groups (Landry and Bourhis, 1997: 25–26). As such, linguistic landscape research is highly relevant for studies in both language policy and ethnolinguistic vitality (Moriarty, 2014: 458). The concept of linguistic landscapes has expanded sociolinguistic research from the usual focus on groups of speakers to a focus on physical spaces, and has thus been argued to have immense interdisciplinary value, overlapping research in disciplines such as urban studies, social geography, psychology, and anthropological and sociological diversity (Blommaert, 2013: 1–2; Ben-Rafael et al., 2010: xi).

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The study of linguistic landscapes transcends the official language policies of a region: for instance, you may live in an officially monolingually Dutch city, but in some neighbourhoods or areas you will find that Dutch is used alongside or even occasionally replaced by other languages, such as Turkish, Arabic, or Chinese. Types of written language can be professionally produced road signs, street and place names, advertisements or billboards, but may also include shop signs, restaurant menus, or even graffiti (Landry and Bourhis, 1997: 25; Blommaert, 2013: 1). For instance, a shop sign in a language differing from the national language can be used to signal to passersby what type of customer is the expected to enter the shop (Papen, 2012: 57). As such, linguistic landscape research provides important information about the nature of multilingualism in a community, often showing a more accurate account of the sociolinguistic reality than official language policies can provide (Moriarty, 2014: 457).

In more recent research, the term linguistic landscape has occasionally been replaced with *semiotic landscape*. Jaworski and Thurlow (2010: 2) argue that referring to a semiotic landscape emphasises “the way written discourse interacts with other discursive modalities: visual images, nonverbal communication, architecture and the built environment.” Additionally, the traditional definition of a linguistic landscape as a fixed notion has been challenged in recent years, with scholars arguing that linguistic landscapes should be treated as dynamic rather than static locations (e.g. Garvin, 2010: 245–255; Pietikäinen et al., 2011: 280). The linguistic landscape today is often defined as a geographical space that should be interpreted in a given moment in time, as the space is constantly changing, and the languages and cultures in it can constantly be repositioned (Garvin, 2010: 245–255; Moriarty, 2014: 457). Rather than focusing on signs in a specific local space, this study observes the use of linguistic markers associated with the Nordic countries in the global linguistic landscape. The focus of the study is mainly on mobile or “un-fixed” signs (see Sebba, 2010), such as product labels and brand logos, but a few static signs are also discussed.

Foreign languages are often used in signs or advertising due to stereotypes associated with speakers of those languages, with those uses further enforcing said stereotypical national identities and the concept of “the national Other” (Piller, 2003: 173). This study investigates how certain orthographic features are used in products and marketing to index specific stereotypical social or national identities, and, by extension, the values connoted to these identities on a global level. The point of interest of the research is the recent rise of stereotypical qualities associated with the Nordic countries, and how linguistic features stemming from Nordic languages are used to evoke these associations in global markets. The study explores the use of words or graphemes associated with Nordic languages in public spaces and marketing in several countries, exemplifying and analysing the methods used to convey a sense of “Nordicness” through written language. In such situations the consumers are not in-group speakers of any of the Nordic languages, but are speakers of other languages who are expected to be attracted to products, shops or restaurants due to positive ideals associated with the Nordic region. Additionally, the study explores how the mimicry of Nordic linguistic features can be used to index globalism and exclusivity in brands with no other discernible Nordic connection.

It should be noted that in this article the term *Nordic* is used to refer collectively to the countries of Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands, which are usually considered to share common cultural and linguistic history. Thus the definition of the Nordics is broader than that of the region of Scandinavia, which traditionally refers only to the countries of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, although the two terms are often erroneously used interchangeably.

## 2. Symbolic value of language

### 2.1. Global language hierarchy and symbolism

While traditional linguistic landscape research can still be used to study the language uses and policies of localised physical spaces, a large part of the language we encounter on a daily basis reaches us through some type of advertisement or marketing, which is (usually) not contained within a specific neighbourhood or city. This type of sign is purposefully designed to attract our attention, to give us an association, and to sell us a product or idea. The language used on a product is a crucial part of its “unique selling proposition” (USP); a partially or wholly symbolic ideal, communicated through the product's label, packaging, and advertising (Kelly-Holmes, 2010: 478).

Many product labels and brand names are designed to explicitly communicate the purpose, use, or origin of the product. However, in some cases it is unimportant whether the name is linguistically relevant, correct, or even comprehensible to the target audience. Instead, the associations brought on by the specific language used can be a more powerful marketing tool than the literal meaning. In these cases the names of products are not intended to communicate the exact meaning of the word(s) to the consumer, but instead rely on the symbolic value of the language (Kelly-Holmes, 2005: 69). Piller (2003) states that the idea behind using a foreign language in advertising is usually to associate the product with the ethno-cultural stereotype about the country where the language is spoken. The consumer's connotations between a language and a specific country are such a defining aspect of the marketing tactic that fundamentally the product's actual origin is of minor importance (Piller, 2003: 175).

Perhaps the most obvious example for the use of a foreign language in advertising is the widespread use of English. English is commonly found in brand names and logo designs, even when the target audience is not necessarily expected to understand the language. As long as the consumer possesses sufficient knowledge of English in their repertoire to recognise the language (see [Blommaert and Backus, 2013](#): 18–19), English can be used in global marketing to evoke positive associations of modernity and globalisation ([Papen, 2012](#): 66). Provided that the consumer identifies the foreign form as belonging to a particular language, they will transfer the ethno-cultural stereotype about the group most frequently associated with that language onto the product ([Piller, 2003](#): 172). Consequently, while signs in a given space can provide insights into the local linguistic community, they can also simply symbolise the values or aspirations of the product or business they advertise ([Scollon and Scollon, 2003](#): 119).

In order to use a foreign language in advertising to sell a product, the language in question has to have positive connotations. This concept is closely linked to the idea of *language hierarchy*. In traditional linguistic landscape research, the use of different languages reflects the relative power and status of the languages within that sociolinguistic context, and official signs in these landscapes can provide insight into local language policies and ideologies ([Cenoz and Gorter, 2006](#): 67; [Pietikäinen et al., 2011](#): 278). However, when a sign is intended to evoke positive reactions in various consumers from completely different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the marketing tactic may rely on broad, more stereotypical associations related to the language. English, which is spoken as a foreign language or at least recognised in most parts of the world, has a high position in the global hierarchy of language and can be used for product names and advertisements on an international level. As long as the consumer audience possesses enough knowledge of English in their linguistic repertoire to recognise when a message is written in English, the language can be used to activate connotations with symbolic values such as cosmopolitanism, success, sophistication or fun ([Piller, 2003](#): 172; [Leeman and Modan, 2010](#): 183; [Cenoz and Gorter, 2006](#): 70). Similarly, thanks to French beauty and fashion ideals having been highly regarded throughout history, the French language has a substantial symbolic value and is still favoured on beauty products all over the world ([Kelly-Holmes, 2010](#): 479–480).

This article proposes that the Nordic languages have acquired significant symbolic value in recent years due to an increase in positive associations relating to Northern Europe, and that this shift is visible in the global language hierarchy and, consequently, in international marketing. Furthermore, increasing utilisation of Nordic-language graphemes in international brands may also have entered them into the global consumer register (i.e. *globalese*, see [Jaworski, 2015a](#)). As such, Nordic orthographic features may be used in words from other languages in order to suggest a sophisticated or worldly global connection, in addition to a specifically Nordic one.

## 2.2. Nordic associations

Unlike countries such as France and Italy, which have been strongly associated with fashion and food for decades or even centuries, widespread positive associations related to Nordic countries are relatively new. In the last century the global perception of the Nordic countries abroad has shifted considerably, from being regarded as a poor and insignificant region in Europe at the start of the 20th century, to being considered one of the most progressive and happy regions in the world today ([Musiał and Chacińska, 2013](#): 289). I argue that this shift is visible in the way that Nordic language features are used in marketing abroad, by directly referencing the Nordics or simply creating associations relating to the region.

Designer furniture from Northern Europe has been marketed globally as “Nordic” since the 1950s, but it has seen a new peak of popularity in recent years with “New Nordic” and Scandinavian retro designs, alongside the general concept of “Nordic living” ([Skou and Munch, 2016](#): 2; [Andersen et al., 2019](#): 215). Both Nordic interior design and fashion have come to be associated with positive qualities of simplicity and craftsmanship, and the conceptual aesthetics of “Nordicness” have spread into other domains ([Andersen et al., 2019](#): 216; [Østergaard et al., 2014](#): 254). Nordic food has become defined with symbolic values such as ‘purity’ and ‘freshness’, qualities which, over time, have become intrinsic to the idea of “the Nordics” ([Hermansen, 2012](#)). According to [Skou and Munch \(2016: 2\)](#), this fascination seems to be “fuelled by different global, political, and economic trends and the reactualisation of the Nordic welfare states as historical role models.”

Although the majority people only speak or understand a limited number of languages, in some cases particular foreign expressions and words can emerge as “emblematic indexes of entire languages and cultures” ([Järlehed et al., 2018](#): 44). Growing interest in and awareness of the Nordics has resulted in abstract concepts such as *hygge* being marketed as lifestyle ideologies. *The Cambridge Dictionary* defines *hygge* as “a Danish word for a quality of coziness [...] that comes from doing simple things in life” ([Cambridge Dictionary Online](#)). Over the last few years, this Danish concept of ‘coziness’ has taken the world by storm, inspiring several lifestyle books, including *Hygge: The Danish Art of Happiness* ([Søderberg, 2016](#)), and *The Little Book of Hygge: The Danish Way to Live Well* ([Wiking, 2016](#)).

As a popular concept, *hygge* has also spread into international advertisement. [Fig. 1](#) shows the word being used in the window of Danish furniture chain BoConcept in Brussels: here the Belgian audience is exposed to both English and



Fig. 1. Window advertisement using the symbolic values of English and Danish combined (Brussels, Belgium).

Danish via the hybrid slogan “Choose your #hyggemoment.” Similarly, [Andersen et al. \(2019\)](#) discuss the use of *hygge* on products, for instance as the name of a scented candle from the brand Skandinavisk. Interestingly, although Skandinavisk produces candles with names such as Hygge and Øy (Norwegian for ‘island’), combining linguistic features and concepts from the Scandinavian countries, the products are designed by a British person and made in France ([Andersen et al., 2019: 216](#)). The website of the Skandinavisk brand also exemplifies a romanticised idea of Nordicness:

“Imagine a great land hidden at the end of a long rocky track. A land populated by silent forests, silvery lakes, secluded islands and mountains of snow. Where nature dominates and seasons dictate. A land larger than Germany, France and Italy but one-tenth of the people [...] Where community, consciousness and timeless values of trust, equality, respect thrive. Where its inhabitants place the greatest priority on life balance, on fellowship, family and friends, and on everyday moments of shared happiness”. (‘About’, [Skandinavisk.com](#))

The Skandinavisk.com website refers to the Nordics using a fictional ideal of a serene, untouched, peaceful place in an otherwise hectic world. Exclusivity and luxury is suggested through the imagery of an isolated and ‘natural’ exotic destination ([Thurlow and Jaworski, 2010: 193](#); see also [Thurlow and Jaworski, 2012](#); [Jaworski, 2019](#)). Skandinavisk perpetuates the idea that ‘silence’ and ‘space’ equal luxury through social exclusion ([Thurlow and Jaworski, 2010: 192](#)), and that, by purchasing a product inspired by the idealised Nordic lifestyle, the consumer can become part of the global elite. This image of the Nordic Utopia demonstrates the fascination with “Nordic Cool” (see [Østergaard et al., 2014](#)), a positive association with exclusivity that can be used to market various products or even activities.

As the Danish word *hygge* is used to sell candles and lifestyle books, the Swedish word *fika*, meaning to ‘have a coffee with something (usually sweet) to eat’, has also gained popularity. While *fika* is an insignificant everyday occurrence for many people in Sweden, in international contexts it is often portrayed as a luxurious activity. This is demonstrated by an excerpt from the website of Løv Organic, a French company producing organic tea:

“The logic behind *fika* is to be present in the moment, in great company, whether with family, friends or colleagues. It’s a moment of pure relaxation and comfort. Participating collectively allows you to take a step back from your activities, decompress, disconnect, and recharge your batteries in a tranquil environment.” (‘The perks of fika and taking a break’, [Lov-organic.com](#))

In recent years the word *fika* has been employed by restaurateurs across the globe: a quick search on the internet shows that there are cafés named Fika from Benelux to Singapore, from the United Kingdom to Canada. Since few



establishments attempt to explain the word in as much detail as Lov-organic.com, the positive associations relating to *fika*, if not the literal meaning of the word, must be relatively salient to people in all of these countries.

As the popularity and recognisability of Nordicism becomes greater, fewer visual clues are required for people to identify a product as Nordic or Nordic-inspired. In some cases, the association can be created by using a full word from a Nordic language, even in situations where the target audience would not understand the word. In other situations, the names of products or businesses may be made up words that are simply intended to look like they stem from a Nordic language. Quite often, however, the writing system of one or several of the Nordic languages may be mimicked, with orthographic features borrowed into other languages in order to inspire associations of Nordicism or globalism.

### 3. Language mimicry

#### 3.1. Writing system and typographic mimicry

For certain linguistic forms to acquire symbolic value and social meaning, they first need to be noticed as occurring within specific contexts (Jaworski, 2015a: 229, citing Johnstone, 2013a,b). The use of a writing system or script is a relatively straightforward way of indexing symbolic values of a certain linguistic identity, if said writing system or script is language-specific. In this study I use the term *writing system*, as defined by Coulmas (2003, 2014), to mean the writing system of an individual language, e.g., the Dutch writing system. The writing system of a specific language is thus called *orthography*, while the term *script* is used exclusively for the graphic form of the units of a writing system (e.g. Roman vs. Cyrillic letters) (Coulmas, 2003, 2014: 17).

The focus of this study is the use of *writing system mimicry* to indicate a specific type of “foreignness.” Coulmas (2003, 2014: 17) refers to this as *typographic mimicry*, and states that it can be compared to *accent mimicry*, in which speakers who have little or no competence in a foreign language colour their speech with certain sounds and phonetic features identified with that language. Like accent mimicry, typographic mimicry involves the use of certain features to indicate a specific foreignness of a text. This use can also be referred to as a *visual accent* (Coulmas, 2003, 2014: 17–18).

Although Coulmas (2003, 2014) prefers to refer to this type of mimicry as typographic mimicry, this study follows the example of Sutherland (2015: 150), who has renamed it *writing system mimicry*. According to Sutherland, the word ‘typographic’ could be replaced by ‘script’, with typographic mimicry covering examples of mimicry such as *faux Arabic* or *faux Cyrillic*. However, the term excludes mimicry of languages which share the same script but different orthographies, such as German and English (Sutherland, 2015: 150). Therefore, Sutherland (2015: 150) prefers the term *writing system mimicry*, defining the concept as the imposing of real or imagined features of the mimicked writing system onto a base writing system, “so that the base writing system somewhat resembles the mimicked writing system while retaining legibility.”

As a broader definition than typographic mimicry, writing system mimicry includes not only the mimicry of other scripts, but can be extended to all linguistic features. The term can thus be used to describe situations in which, for instance, product names or texts written in English have been embellished with orthographic features intended to evoke associations relating to another language or culture. However, as Jaworski (2015a) argues, the mimicry of features from foreign languages and scripts may not always be intended to index a specific region. Instead, it may be the use of *globalese*, i.e. a commercial register suggesting “typographic-orthographic cosmopolitanism” (Jaworski, 2015a: 232), using innovative orthographic combinations to index worldliness rather than one language or culture.

#### 3.2. Orthography indexing identity

For certain orthographic or typographic features to be used as indexes of social or national identities, they first have to be clearly associated with particular languages or groups of speakers. For instance, Spitzmüller (2012: 261, 266) points out how different graphemes specific to German writing (i.e. ⟨ä⟩, ⟨Ä⟩, ⟨ö⟩, ⟨Ö⟩, ⟨ü⟩, ⟨Ü⟩, ⟨ß⟩), as well as blackletter type have come to be associated with “Germanness.” Furthermore, the extended use of these features in instances of “graphic crossing” in other languages has resulted in these orthographic features becoming associated with certain ideologies (Jaworski, 2015a: 220). The typical “German” orthographic features, including blackletter type, may thus be used in, for instance, English-based brand names or designs to symbolise themes such as Gothic or medieval mythology, or even Nazism (Spitzmüller, 2012: 279). Meanwhile, thanks to imagery of old-world toughness and brutality associated with Germanic or Nordic tribes, German orthography has also been transferred to rock and metal typology, using what is known as the “metal umlaut” (Campbell, 2003: 6). Throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century, umlauts have been used to symbolise ‘toughness’ in rock and heavy metal band names, starting with Blue Öyster Cult in 1976 and continuing on with other bands such as Motörhead and Mötley Crüe (Spitzmüller, 2012: 279; Jaworski, 2015a: 220; Campbell, 2003: 6).

When writing system mimicry is used in brand names or logos, the goal is not to be ambiguous about the language in which the messages are written. Instead, the focus is on rendering the name in a familiar alphabet or language, while also presenting “the visual equivalent of a foreign accent” (Seargeant, 2012: 192).

The images displayed in Fig. 2 demonstrate the use of writing system mimicry, such as *faux Devanagari* (see Chachra, 2014) and *faux Cyrillic* (see McMichael, 2009). All of the signs are clearly written using the Roman alphabet as a base, as the intention is for the target language speakers to be able to read the product names. However, the signs are also written in some type of *pseudoscript*, meant to indicate the thematic identity of the product. Image 1 in Fig. 2 is the sign of a restaurant located in Belgium: the French name *Le Syrtaki* can be clearly read by speakers of French. However, even for individuals who do not know that *syrtaki* refers to a Greek dance, the restaurant can be clearly identified as Greek as a result of the base writing system (i.e. the Roman script) mimicking Greek letters.

Similarly, an English-speaking person can easily read the English words ‘Minutes to Destiny’ on the beer pictured in Image 2. However, the text is clearly inspired by the Devanagari script, used in Sanskrit or Hindi, and is intended to remind the viewer of India. Likewise, Image 3 shows a Japanese-inspired beer with the English name *Hunter*, written in a font suggesting Japanese Kanji. Finally, the name of the Dutch beer pictured as Image 4, *Dirty Katarina*, is written in with letters intended to remind the reader of the Cyrillic script and, by extension, of Russia. For the purpose of marketing, it is irrelevant that the script is unreadable *faux Cyrillic*: the Cyrillic grapheme ⟨Д⟩ (pronounced /d/) is used as Latin ⟨A⟩; ⟨и⟩ (pronounced /i/) is used in the place of ⟨N⟩; and ⟨Я⟩ (pronounced /ja/) is used in the place of ⟨R⟩. Finally, the grapheme ⟨K⟩ is mirrored, likely to resemble ⟨Я⟩, even though such a grapheme does not exist in Cyrillic.

## 4. The study

### 4.1. Sampling linguistic landscapes

One challenging aspect of linguistic landscape research has always been the question of how to perform sampling (Gorter, 2006: 2–3). Although the use of digital cameras allows researchers to take a potentially unlimited number of photographs of languages displayed in a space, it is challenging to pinpoint which signs can be considered representative of a particular linguistic landscape. Leeman and Modan (2009: 341) investigated the linguistic landscape of Washington DC’s Chinatown, choosing to largely limit their data sampling to signs located in the neighbourhood’s two main commercial corridors. Similarly, in a study comparing the linguistic landscapes of the minority regions of Friesland (the Netherlands) and the Basque Country (Spain), Cenoz and Gorter (2006: 67) explored signs on a single shopping street in both areas. However, even when narrowing down the location from a huge city or an entire neighbourhood to a few streets, it is problematic to establish a sound methodology for quantitative data sampling. Defining what does and what does not constitute a sign and how signs should be categorised can be very challenging. Consequently, like the studies of previous researchers, such as Jaworski and Yeung (2010), our research focuses on the qualitative rather than the



Fig. 2. Examples of product labels and signs involving writing system mimicry.

quantitative aspect of signs in the linguistic landscape. The examples used in this article were discovered by the researcher by chance in various cities in various countries. These examples were photographed where they were encountered and, whenever possible, the websites of the companies were visited. While the majority of the signs were identified in the Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium, several of the signs and labels that were noted down or photographed referred to companies or products from other countries. The examples were collected during the winter of 2018–2019, and have been defined below according to the methods employed to demonstrate a sense of “Nordicness” or simply “foreignness.”

#### 4.2. Nordic linguistic features in international marketing

Although the languages of the Nordic countries do not have a script that would make them immediately distinguishable from other languages, they do share a few distinct orthographic features. Danish and Norwegian use the graphemes ⟨æ, Æ⟩ and ⟨ø, Ø⟩, for the phonemes /æ:/ and /ø:/, respectively, while Swedish and Finnish use the corresponding graphemes ⟨ä, Ä⟩, and ⟨ö, Ö⟩. Icelandic and Faroese also use the graphemes ⟨æ, Æ⟩ and ⟨ø, Ø⟩, although ⟨æ, Æ⟩ represent the diphthong /ai/ in Icelandic and /ea:/ in Faroese. Meanwhile, ⟨å⟩ and ⟨Å⟩ are used in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish for the phonemes /ɔ:/ (Danish, Norwegian) and /o:/ (Swedish). The graphemes ⟨å, Å⟩ are also included in the Finnish alphabet, but as Finnish ⟨o, O⟩ corresponds to the same phoneme, they have no native use in Finnish, and only occur in proper nouns of Swedish origin, such as place-names (Löfberg et al., 2003: 458). Because these orthographic features are largely distinct for the Nordic languages (with a few exceptions),<sup>1</sup> they are often used to index Nordicness in a wide variety of products, in a similar fashion as faux Cyrillic is used to index the Russian language or Soviet associations (McMichael, 2009: 339).

The study focuses on three different ways in which Nordic linguistic features are used to suggest Nordicness or globalism in international marketing. Some brands make use of actual words stemming from Nordic languages, as in the case of the previously mentioned Hygge candle or the many cafés named Fika. Other companies use words or phrases that may originally stem from any of the Nordic languages, but which are intentionally misspelled, exaggerated, or enhanced with additional Nordic or “foreign” features. Finally, a wide variety of brands use *faux Nordic*, i.e. the mimicry of Nordic features and graphemes in foreign language words, to associate themselves either with the Nordic region or to suggest internationalism.

##### 4.2.1. Nordic words marketing foreign products

As the furniture mogul IKEA has shown throughout the years, consumers are quite happy to buy products with incomprehensible and unpronounceable Nordic-language names. With the rise of “Nordic Cool” in recent years, progressively more brands have taken to this approach. While products such as the Hygge candle and businesses such as the countless Fika cafés capitalise on relatively well-known meanings of these words, many other brands employ lesser-known words or names from various Nordic languages. The images below demonstrate a few occurrences of this approach in global marketing.

The first image in Fig. 3 shows an advertisement of Åland, a chain of South Korean affordable fashion stores, as displayed on their Official Åland Instagram account. The company has recently has expanded to the United States and opened a flagship store in Brooklyn, New York (Kim, 2018). Incidentally, Åland is the name of the largest island of Finland, located in the Baltic Sea between Finland and Sweden. The island is known as Åland in Swedish and as Ahvenanmaa in Finnish. As the island itself can hardly be argued to have many connections with South Korea nor fashion in general, the name has likely been chosen due to its symbolic value as “Nordic.” In spite of the island being Finnish, the grapheme ⟨Å⟩ only occurs in Swedish, Danish and Norwegian, and thus the name Åland indexes these countries and the associations related to them to anyone with these languages in their repertoire.

Slightly less obscure is the name Distrikt Nørrebro, a Dutch clothing brand clearly inspired by a district in Copenhagen. Their logo is pictured as Image 2 in Fig. 3. In recent years, the district known as Nørrebro has become well-known for being one of the most hip, fashionable, and multicultural areas of Copenhagen. Therefore, it is not difficult to see why a clothing brand would like to be so clearly associated with the district. Nørrebro can be compared to Brooklyn in New York City, which likewise has inspired names of countless brands in popular culture due to the reputation of the district, particularly due to its history relating to hip-hop music.

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that various combinations of the graphemes ⟨ä, Ä⟩, ⟨æ, Æ⟩, ⟨ä, Ä⟩, ⟨ö, Ö⟩, and ⟨ø, Ø⟩ are also found in the alphabets used by the Sámi languages. However, although the majority of the Sámi people are found within the Nordic countries (i.e. in Sweden, Norway, and Finland), the Sámi culture is often considered distinct from the majority Nordic cultures, and Sámi customs and language are seldomly represented outside the traditional Sámi regions. As such, the current study presumes that global associations relating to the Nordic languages may not widely include Sámi languages.



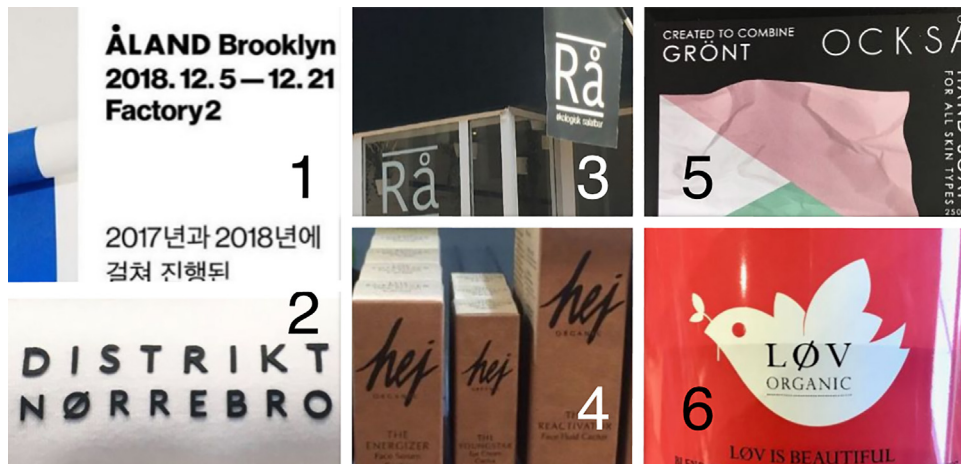


Fig. 3. Examples of brands and businesses using words from Nordic languages in their marketing.

Another Dutch company capitalising on the Nordic trend is the salad bar Rå (Fig. 3, Image 3). As the word *rå* means 'raw' in Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian, the establishment seems to be aptly named. However, the choice to use a Nordic name for a salad bar located in another country highlights positive concepts such as 'purity' and 'health' that seem to be associated with the Nordics. Additionally, while it could be argued that the name Rå might be understood by perceptive local consumers ('raw' is *rauw* in Dutch), the establishment has also chosen to include the Norwegian/Danish subtitle *økologisk salatbar* ('ecologic salad bar'). Although the meaning of the name may still be understood by some Dutch speakers, the name Rå økologisk salatbar is a calculated marketing tactic. The name, which includes both the graphemes ⟨å⟩ and ⟨ø⟩, suggests to the consumer that the establishment exemplifies the high quality, health, and even luxury associated with the Nordic countries, even if the marketed product is something as mundane as a salad.

Although many brands or products make use of actual words from Nordic languages, in many cases these words make little sense in association with the product itself. An example of this is German brand of cosmetics called Hej, pictured as Image 4 of Fig. 3. The product name Hej stems from the Swedish or Danish word *hej*, simply meaning 'Hello'. Considering this greeting does not in any way reference or relate to cosmetics, one can only assume that the consumer is intended to associate the Nordic language reference with concepts of health or beauty. A similar strategy seems to be employed by the brand Också, pictured in Image 5, the name of which means 'as well, also' in Swedish. The company states that their cosmetics are intended to double as an interior design feature and that the owners are "passionate about design, brand development and the Scandinavian lifestyle" (Ocksacosmetics.com (2019)). Although the company is based in Sweden, the owners are Dutch and South African. As the company website is only available in English and Dutch, this suggests that the target consumers are not Swedish (or at least not Swedish-speaking). Additionally, both the brand name Också and the name of the soap, Grönt ('green'), seem intended to draw people in using associations related to the Swedish orthography rather than their meaning. In spite of the word 'green' possessing connotations of being natural or healthy, this potential meaning of *grönt* will not necessarily be understood by the non-Swedish-speaking consumer. Likewise, the word *också* ('as well', presumably relating to the double use of the product as a cosmetic and a design element) also seems intended to mainly attract people to purchase the product due to its Scandinavian-sounding name.

The final example of a company using words from a Nordic language to market their products abroad is the aforementioned French company Løv Organic. The word *løv* (pronounced /lø:v/) is Norwegian/Danish and means 'leaf', thus being appropriate for a company that sells tea. Still, the desire to play up the association with Scandinavia and the Nordics is obvious, as suggested by the explanation of *fika* on the company website. Additionally, the website of Løv Organic states that the company has been "inspired by this part of the world where a modern lifestyle goes hand-in-hand with respecting the environment" (Lov-organic.com), drawing a parallel between exclusive modernism and the simplicity of nature. The company is keen on using the grapheme ⟨ø⟩ whenever possible, not only in their name but also in the name of their Skandiblog, which is a portmanteau of 'Scandinavia' and 'blog', with ⟨ø⟩ substituted for ⟨o⟩. Furthermore, although the company clearly wishes to associate itself with the Nordic region, Løv Organic is likely also a reference to the English word 'love'. Many names of the different teas are puns referring to the duality of the brand name, e.g. 'Lovely morning', 'Løv is beautiful', or 'Løv is pure'. As such, the product also displays the popular commodification of love (Jaworski, 2015b: 91), suggesting the affective state of love may be bought, given, received, or experienced through the consumption of a luxury tea product.



Fig. 4. Examples of product labels and designs involving exaggerated Nordic features in their names.

#### 4.2.2. Exaggerated Nordicness

While the previous examples have used names and words that have actual meanings in various Nordic languages, some brands prefer to use names that exaggerate the Nordic features. Examples of such brands and businesses can be found in Fig. 4.

The first logo pictured in Fig. 4 is that of the concept store Jüttu, located in Bruges, Belgium. The name could be argued to be a correct usage of a Nordic word, given that the name is spelled Juttu on their website ([Juttu.be](http://Juttu.be)). The website accurately informs the reader that *juttu* is a Finnish word with several meanings, including ‘thing’, ‘anecdote’, ‘possession’, and ‘crush or new relationship between two people’. However, in the current study the store name has been classified as being exaggeratedly Nordic or foreign due to the brand logo. In the logo the store name is stylised as Jüttu, using a macron over ⟨u⟩. This type of diacritic does not exist in Finnish, and has likely only been included in the logo in order to indicate an immediate and obvious sense of foreignness in the name.

A similar near-Finnish name is used by the outdoor clothing brand Napapijri, pictured as Image 2 in Fig. 4. Although the brand itself is Italian, the name is a misspelled version from the Finnish word *napapiiri*, meaning ‘Polar circle’. Furthermore, the name Napapijri is often displayed alongside the Norwegian flag. The purpose seems to have been to combine linguistic features and imagery from two Nordic countries known for their nature and cold weather as a method of suggesting quality and reliability of the clothing brand. The company itself argues that this combination is a demonstration of its intersectionality, of “defying labels, transcending boxes, pursuing the unexpected journey into nature and creativity” ([Napapijri.co.uk](http://Napapijri.co.uk)).

The final example of a business using exaggerated Nordic-like linguistic features in their branding is the a sign for a pop-up bar and restaurant in the Netherlands, pictured as Image 3 in Fig. 4. The restaurant itself is called Bårr, and the sign suggests an additional connection to the Nordics with the text “vålkommen”. In Swedish *välkommen* means ‘welcome’, while the corresponding word in Danish and Norwegian is *velkommen*. While the sign overall makes use of English as the base language by indicating the opening times in English, it is likely that both English-speaking tourists and local Dutch speakers were expected to be able to deduce the intended meaning of “vålkommen” (considering the word is *welkom* in Dutch). However, it is notable that the business misspelled the original word, replacing Swedish ⟨ä⟩ or Danish/Norwegian ⟨e⟩ with ⟨å⟩. The grapheme ⟨å⟩ is also prominently used in the name Bårr, which is completely meaningless. It is likely that the company intended for the name to resemble how individuals of other language backgrounds might expect the word ‘bar’ to look in a Nordic language. Incidentally, ‘bar’ in Swedish, Danish, or Norwegian is simply *bar*, meaning that the correct translation would not suggest Nordicness or foreignness in the same way as the nonsense name Bårr.

#### 4.2.3. Faux Nordic

Faux Nordic, like faux Devanagari or faux Cyrillic, refers to Nordic-language orthographic features (e.g. ⟨å, æ, ø⟩) being mimicked in the base writing system of other languages. However, for many products it is difficult to assess whether this

type of Nordic writing system mimicry is intended to provide the consumers with associations specifically related to the Nordic region, or if they simply are examples of *globalese* in use.

Fig. 5, Image 1 shows the logo of the German cosmetics brand Nø – no make up. As there is no such word as “nø” in either Danish or Norwegian, it is likely that the brand simply makes use of the grapheme ⟨ø⟩ as a replacement of ⟨o⟩ in the English word ‘no’. As the tagline of the brand is “no make up,” the inclusion of the orthographic feature ⟨ø⟩ may be intended to suggest concepts often associated with the Nordics, such as health and simplicity (and, by extension, clear skin). However, it is unlikely that any pronunciation change is indicated with the use of ⟨ø⟩ in the place of ⟨o⟩. A similarly innovative use of the grapheme ⟨ø⟩ is also found in Image 2, picturing the logo of a scented candle with the name KarmArøm (a portmanteau of ‘karma’ and ‘aroma’), which is produced and sold in Belgium. Likewise, a mimicked ⟨ø⟩ is present in the logo of the jewellery brand Nøvae, also advertised in Brussels, Belgium (Image 3). Neither of the brands KarmArøm or Nøvae seem to suggest any association with the Nordic countries aside from the use of the grapheme ⟨ø⟩. However, it is notable that the KarmArøm candle is sold by the Belgian concept store Hopono, which, similarly to Jüttu, heavily stylises the graphemes of the logo with macrons and underscores, potentially in an effort to seem more exotic or international.

Another company which employs faux Nordic is Töst Beverage, a company based in the United States and pictured in Image 4. On their website, they use the phrase “it’s always the right time to TÖST”, suggesting that the name stems from English ‘toast’, with the grapheme ⟨ö⟩ inserted to replace the diphthong. As with the brand name Nø, it is unlikely that Töst is intended to be read as /tøst/, as the use of ⟨ö⟩ suggests. However, it is unclear whether the name Töst is supposed to suggest a Nordic or European connection for the American consumer, or if the name is simply meant to seem international and exclusive. Nevertheless, the symbolic values of ‘elitism’ and ‘health’ are referred to on the company website, where the product is described as a natural, non-alcoholic beverage suited for fine dining ([Töstbeverages.com](https://tostbeverages.com)).

The fifth image in Fig. 5 demonstrates a static sign advertising bread with the word “TØAST”, found in a brewery in Ghent, Belgium. Like the name Töst, the sign “TØAST” is probably intended to be read as ‘toast’, ignoring the grapheme ⟨ø⟩. Interestingly, the same establishment also had a sign stating “RØK” to indicate their barbecue menu. Considering that *røk* is the past simple for ‘smoke’ in Norwegian (compare *rook* in the local Dutch), the use of the grapheme ⟨ø⟩ in both TØAST and RØK in the Belgian establishment seems to suggest some type of Nordic association.

Images 6 and 7 show two t-shirts with faux Nordic used for the English words ‘enjoy’ ([Diego-Garcia.fr](https://diego-garcia.fr)) and ‘love’ ([DHGate.com](https://dhgate.com)). In both words ⟨ø⟩ has been substituted for ⟨o⟩, creating the faux Nordic forms “ENJØY” and “LØVE,” respectively. Although *løve* means ‘lion’ in Danish or Norwegian (where it is pronounced /lø:wə/), it is unlikely that the designers were aiming for this particular meaning and pronunciation. Instead, the grapheme ⟨ø⟩ has probably been included to evoke either specific associations with Nordic or Scandinavian fashion, or simply to suggest that the product is foreign or cosmopolitan.



Fig. 5. Examples of product labels and designs involving faux Nordic.

## 5. Discussion

This qualitative research project explored the use of Nordic linguistic features in international product labels and marketing. In many cases companies use Nordic-language words as names, regardless of the actual origin of a product or brand, and sometimes regardless of the connection between the meaning of the word and the product itself. Meanwhile, some brands simply use features from one or several of the Nordic languages in order to create or exaggerate the Otherness of the product in question.

Overall, the use of orthographic features associated with the Nordic countries is prevalent in the vast majority of the examples used in this study. The majority of names made use of one or several of the stereotypically Nordic linguistic features, e.g. ⟨ø⟩ in Løv Organic, Distrikt Nørrebro, and Nø, ⟨å⟩ in Rå, Åland, and Bårr, or ⟨ö⟩ in Grönt and Töst. The specific popularity of the graphemes ⟨ø⟩ and ⟨å⟩ in marketing is likely due to their relative linguistic unambiguity: while ⟨ö⟩ and ⟨ä⟩ may also suggest German orthography and language, ⟨ø⟩ and ⟨å⟩ are largely only associated with Nordic languages. The use of these features enforces the Nordic connotations of the brand or business, even when the consumer might not understand the original word. Only three of the brands, i.e. the cosmetics brand Hej, the concept store Jüttu, and the clothing brand Napapijri, did not make use of the orthographic features ⟨å, æ, ä, ø, ö⟩ in their names. On the other hand, both Napapijri and Jüttu exaggerated the “foreignness” of their brands in other ways, i.e. by using the non-Nordic linguistic features ⟨ñ⟩ and the combination -ij- in otherwise Nordic-language names.

Both in the case of exaggerated brand names such as Jüttu, Bårr and Napapijri, and faux Nordic brand names such as Nø or Töst, the marketing tactic relies on the ability of the consumer to recognise the form of these words as relating to the Nordic countries, or, at the very least, to something foreign or unique. With the brands making use of exaggeration, the focus on being associated specifically with “Nordicness” seems more important, given that statements referring to one or several Nordic countries can be found on their websites. However, then it comes to products employing faux Nordic, it seems that often the goal is simply to seem “exotic” or “international,” not to overtly associate the brand with Nordic values. The innovative use of the Nordic-language graphemes ⟨ø⟩, ⟨å⟩, and ⟨ö⟩ in words from English or other languages can be argued to fall into the category of visual-linguistic forms or *globalese* proposed by Jaworski (2015a). Jaworski discusses the nonstandard use of punctuation marks, diacritics, and tittles as graphemic indexing of the global, arguing that the resulting forms are often “detached from any specific ethnolinguistic group or locality, with only echoes of their origins in any traceable “national” or “ethnic” languages” (2015a: 220, 231). Thus t-shirt slogans stating “ENJØY” or brands with names such as KarmArøm may simply seek to suggest a foreign or global association, not a direct connection to Nordic languages or cultures.

In some cases the incomprehensibility or unreadability of some brand or business names may also be intended to suggest a high-end product or establishment. In a study on visible gentrification in Brooklyn, New York, Trinch and Snajdr (2017) demonstrate how up-scale shops and restaurants tend to favour *distinction-making signs*. Brands or establishments seek to distinguish themselves by using names made up of a single word or short phrase, a polysemic or cryptic name, or a name in another language than English (Trinch and Snajdr, 2017: 75). By distinguishing the brand with a quirky, weird, or incomprehensible name, the business can be seen as more worldly and thus more attractive to consumers. While these types of names seem textually sparse, they often have a rich underlying meaning or association, making those who know the meaning(s) feel exclusive because they are “in-the-know” (Trinch and Snajdr, 2017: 76). A name such as Rå can be argued to be *distinctive* in this way: few Dutch customers would initially be expected to make the linguistic connection between Norwegian/Danish *rå* and Dutch *rauw* (‘raw’), but the name is obscure enough to seem exclusive and authentic, and thus to warrant attention. Additionally, if or when the customer does find out the meaning of the name, they acquire a feeling of being in on a private joke.

While distinction-making signs can be used to convey a sense of sophistication in marketing, so can the concept of silence and space, as previously discussed in relation to Skandinavisk.com and Lov-Organic.com. The majority of the products or logos in this study seem to strive for a “visual silence,” using simple and understated packaging or logo designs. Brands such as Distrikt Nørrebro, Hej, Rå, Töst and Nø use few colours and shy away from intricate texts or images. The relative emptiness and simplicity of the product design is reminiscent of the discrete typography used in advertisements for luxury holidays (Jaworski, 2019: 96), suggesting that the target consumer is likely at least aspiring upper-middle class. The visual silence reflects the consumer perception of a parallel between tranquility and exclusivity, with many brands preferring to use simple black and white designs to index elegance and refinement (Jaworski, 2019: 103; Järlehed et al., 2018: 50; Adami, 2018: 12).

Although some companies use Nordic linguistic forms simply to be distinctive or to demonstrate a global consumer register, many of the brands analysed in this article seem to purposefully channel positive associations relating specifically to Nordic culture, food, and lifestyle. These findings support previous research referencing the idea of “Nordic Cool” as an international marketing tactic (e.g. Andersen et al., 2019; Skou and Munch, 2016; Hermansen, 2012). The



conscious effort of these brands to associate themselves with what they consider to be Nordic values is also evident from overt declarations found on several websites. For instance, the companies Också, Jüttu, and Løv Organic all define their source of inspiration as Nordic or Scandinavian lifestyle or design. It is also clear that these companies are specifically targeting a non-Nordic audience, given that most of them are based outside the Nordic countries, and in most cases their websites are not available in any of the Nordic languages.

The study shows a clear relationship between the linguistic features employed by various businesses and brands selling fashion and cosmetics, and the values they seek to convey. With the exception of texts involving pure faux Nordic or *globalese*, many of the product names stem from existing words in one or several of the Nordic languages. Yet in most cases the intended foreignness seems to be evoked through the use of graphemes associated with Nordic languages, rather than through the meanings of the words themselves. Indeed, it is not the meaning of the foreign language that is most relevant in advertising, but the identification of this language by the consumer (e.g. [Piller, 2003](#); [Blommaert and Backus, 2013](#): 18–19). In some cases simply distinguishing a product or establishment with an unusual name is enough to seem exclusive (see [Trinch and Snajdr, 2017](#)). For the brand it is unimportant whether the audience understands the meaning of words such as *också* or *løv*, or if a name such Jüttu, Töst, or Napapijri is conventionally meaningful in the literal sense. The focus is on these names attracting (usually middle- or upper-class) consumers by evoking positive connotations suggesting globalism, sophistication, or the exclusive ideal of the Nordic lifestyle.

It is interesting to note that the countries of Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Norway all seem to be referenced under the umbrella terms of either “Scandinavian” or “Nordic Cool,” without much distinction being made between them. Whether a business or brand chooses to use a Swedish, Finnish, Norwegian, or Danish linguistic reference in their marketing, they all point to the same values of stereotypically Nordic or Scandinavian lifestyle or design. Internationally there seems to be very little concern regarding ideologically treating the Nordic countries as a collective unit, both culturally and linguistically. As such, it is irrelevant whether a nonsense name such as Bår suggests a Swedish, Danish or Norwegian root to the consumer, as all of the Nordic countries are essentially treated as a single cultural entity with a uniform set of symbolic values. Nevertheless, it is notable that during my research, I never encountered examples of specifically Icelandic or Faroese orthographic features, e.g. the graphemes ⟨Þ, þ⟩ or ⟨Ð, ð⟩. This may suggest that Iceland and the Faroe Islands are at this moment in time conceptually removed from the Nordic countries in the eyes of the international audience, perhaps due to their physical distance from the other Nordic countries.

## Conflict of interest

None.

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